

## Article

# The Political Discourse of the Church of Greece during the Crisis: An Empirical Approach

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**Abstract:** This article presents the analysis of an empirical study that explored the political discourse of the Church of Greece (CoG) during a specific period of the Greek financial crisis, that is, from January 2015 to January 2019. The analysis is based on official texts of the CoG, reports in two daily newspapers, and the results of a quantitative content analysis. Through our analysis, we explore three main questions. The first focuses on the types of issues ('agenda') raised by the main representatives of the CoG; the second focuses on the framing used concerning these issues; and the third focuses on how the agenda and frames interact with regard to the CoG's active (discursive) role as an 'established church' and/or a 'public religion'. Our findings indicated that the CoG intervened in a considerable number of issues not strictly related to religion or the Greek financial crisis. Moreover, the main framing devices of the CoG's discourse varied from identity to conflict frames, while its discourse reflected its self-understanding as both an established church and a public religion.

**Keywords:** Church of Greece; political discourse; financial crisis; Greek society; Greek political system; established church; public religion; quantitative content analysis; frames



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## 1. Introduction

The current study analyses the political discourse of the Church of Greece (CoG) in the time of socioeconomic crisis, that is, during the period 2015–2019. To this end, it empirically analyses the content, the orientation, and the rhetorical framing of the political discourse of the CoG. The political consequences of church and state relations and the public presence of the CoG in Greek society are issues of intensive research interest. While the conceptual and empirical analysis of the political interventions of the churches in the public sphere in the European context has been a topic of interest and research in recent years (Guzek 2019; Itçaina 2019; Lesniczak 2016), it should also be pointed out that the lack of an empirical study on the political discourse of the CoG is often perceived as a notable gap in both Greek and international bibliography (Stathopoulou 2010, p. 198). Most empirical studies are related to a social and political context prior to the period of the Greek financial crisis and focus on specific questions, such as religiosity (Georgiadou and Nikolakopoulos 2002), the (national) ID card controversy (Molokotos-Liederman 2007; Stavrakakis 2003), the relation between faith and trust in political institutions (Stathopoulou 2010), and the dimensions of the welfare and charity provided by the CoG (Fokas 2010). In addition, more recent studies focus on the political discourse of the CoG in the context of the crisis (Kessareas 2019); while of major theoretical interest, they do not adopt a comprehensive quantitative approach, taking into account both Greek society and the political system. In this respect, given the particular social and political circumstances of the financial crisis, which have profoundly affected Greece during the last decade, the analysis and the interpretation of the politicisation of the discourse of the CoG in an empirically informative way is of major importance.

The empirical study of the political discourse of the CoG during the years of crisis is not merely connected to the political impact and the social consequences of the financial instability and the austerity measures on Greek society. Factors such as the existence of a coalition government with the party of the 'Coalition of the Radical Left' (Synaspismós Rizospastikís Aristerás/SYRIZA) as its basic component, the observed exacerbation of the migration/refugee crisis, and the further political and economic involvement of the European Union in domestic policy undoubtedly affected the political discourse of the CoG in the period of 2015–2019. Even if the overall socio-economic crisis does not necessarily imply a dramatic alteration of the political discourse of the CoG, the relation between religion and politics in contemporary Greece represents an analytical challenge for empirical political science, and its full appreciation requires a comprehensive empirical study of the public discourse of the CoG against the backdrop of the major social and political challenges of the crisis in order to better understand to what extent and how the CoG dealt with them.

## 2. Religion and Politics in Greece

Greek history is characterised by the strong influence of religion and the pivotal role of the CoG at societal, cultural, and political levels. Following Casanova's well-known typology, one could define the CoG as an 'established church' (Casanova 1994, pp. 22, 55–56). Greek law recognises the CoG as a public law entity, and the Greek constitution defines the 'Eastern Orthodox Church of Christ' as the 'prevailing religion'. While most legal scholars interpret this clause through a non-normative lens (Alivizatos 1999; Manitakis 2000), there is no doubt that the 'prevailing religion' constitutional clause and the recognition of the CoG as a public law entity have some significant legal, social, and practical consequences that are accompanied by the concession of special financial and institutional/political privileges to the CoG by the Greek state. These privileges include, among others, the provision of remuneration and pensions to the clergy by the state, various tax exemptions, the unequal treatment of religious minorities, and the predominance of the Orthodox doctrine in school religious education (Alivizatos 1999; see also Fokas 2010, p. 181).

In terms of political influence, the domestic political culture is characterised by the 'continuous entanglement' between the CoG and the Greek state, which represent two distinct but intertwined public authorities (Georgiadou 2009, p. 132). As an established church, the CoG enjoys high levels of social and political visibility, particularly evident in the religious oath in the swearing-in ceremony for the President of the Republic and members of the Greek Parliament set out in the Greek constitution, in the presence of icons on schools and state buildings, and in the presence of the clergy in various civic ceremonies or customary rituals (Makrides 2010, p. 87). Moreover, the long-established relation between religion and national identity, coupled with the absence of robust religious pluralism (Prodromou 2004), remains a structural component of the Greek political system and reinforces the hegemonic position of the CoG in Greek society (Mavrogordatos 2003).

However, the strong legal and political ties between the Greek state and the CoG do not necessarily imply a complete fusion of interests between them. While the main structural components of this relationship remain relatively untouched and the prospect of a full legal separation between the CoG and the state is not really an option for either party, at least for the time being, the relation between the CoG as a public institution and the Greek state is not a one-way relation of subordination of the CoG to state authority. State interventions aiming to modernise the Greek social and cultural legal framework (e.g., civil wedding, religious education, identity cards, cremation, civil partnerships, creation of mosques, religious minorities) have disturbed the mutually recognisable and relatively stable functional settlement of the 'distinct roles' between state and religious authority several times (Roudometof 2011, p. 98). In addition to subverting its organisational autonomy by subordinating its authority to the power of the state, the CoG also adopts the stance of a social actor and, by entering the public sphere, seeks both to negotiate the parameters of its relationship with the state and consolidate its social and cultural influence (Fokas 2009, p. 360).

This dimension is clearly observed in the case of the CoG, which is related to the Greek state in a twofold way. On the one hand, as an established church, the CoG is content to ensure and reproduce its hegemonic position in Greek society through the negotiation of the parameters of its access to state authority. From this point of view, the CoG is primarily engaged in the maintenance of the status quo and concentrates its institutional efficacy and organisational resources on the successful reproduction of its social hegemony and political influence by redefining the margins of its continuing social presence and negotiating its privileged legal status, especially when it comes to ecclesiastical and religious matters (Roudometof 2008, p. 75). In this respect, the public discourse of the CoG is mostly shaped by its parallel participation with state rule (Georgiadou 1995, p. 310; Karagiannis 2009, p. 153).

On the other hand, as a public religion and an active political actor in civil society with its own aspirations and interests, the CoG confronts the state and/or other domestic and international political agents on various domestic and international issues (Georgiadou 2009, pp. 132–33, 140–41; Prodromou 2004, p. 69). In addition to or beyond their strong interrelationship with the state, public religions do not confine themselves to the private sphere but intervene in the public sphere as social and political actors and form dissenting powers of moral criticism and political opposition regarding public affairs. Public religions question the boundaries between the private and the public and contest governmental action by adopting an autonomous public stance within civil society and publicly debating various political, moral, and social issues beyond strictly ecclesiastical matters or church–state relation issues (Casanova 1994, p. 6; Casanova 2003, pp. 111–12, 118). In this respect, the CoG enters the political arena as a social actor investing in moral critique and social engagement. It participates in public debates regarding various social and political issues extending far beyond the scope of its immediate interest and its apparent ability to influence governmental decision-making and public policy on strictly ecclesiastical issues (Roudometof 2011, pp. 108–9).

From a methodological point of view, the distinction between established church and public religion is an analytical one and does not depict two clearly distinct historical trends. It serves as a useful methodological tool to show that the public authority of the CoG is not necessarily premised on the absolute identity of its interests with those of the state. Instead, it also depends on the adoption of a certain mode of political engagement following the dynamics of social mobilisation through the prospect of shaping public opinion against the state (Demertzis 2001, p. 89; Georgiadou 2009, pp. 131, 140). It follows that what determines the relation between the CoG and the Greek state is not a pre-established harmony of interests but a changeable relation, one that is as much of co-operation as it is of confrontation and political conflict (Makrides 2010, p. 66).

In this respect, the politicisation of the discourse of the CoG depicts a structural and, for the present moment, ineradicable component of Greek political culture pertaining to the tension between these two roles of the church. The CoG constantly seeks to identify its proper political space by adopting a flexible and negotiable strategy vis-à-vis the Greek state, the political system as a whole, and even various European and international institutions, through the adoption of specific discursive and rhetorical strategies on a variety of issues (Stavrakakis 2003, pp. 162–64, 166). This is particularly evident when the CoG confronts legislation affecting its social and legal status or when social cohesion, national identity, and the moral values of Greek society are at stake, according to the CoG's own understanding of the conditions and prospects of Greek society (Roudometof 2008, pp. 75, 86; Fokas 2010, p. 179).

From this point of view, what is of particular interest is not so much the rather evident politicisation of the discourse of the CoG as such, but the analysis of the various factors that determine the content and the orientation of the discourse of the CoG within Greek civil society. The public discourse of the CoG is mostly shaped by the strong historical link between religion and national identity, which was, and remains, a crucial factor in understanding its public presence and political power. By embracing the logic of nationalist ideology, the CoG presents itself as the sole authentic defender of cultural heritage, of traditional values, and of national interests, most notably in periods of crisis, and legitimates itself as a public authority parallel to the state (Georgiadou 1995). It also

develops a rather conservative moral critique of modernising trends by using the dynamics of popular mobilisation against the perceived ‘violations’ of national identity and the ‘westernisation’ of Greek society (Papastathis 2015, p. 18). The ID card controversy, which received massive attention from the mass media, the confrontations regarding religious education in schools, and the Macedonian issue are three prominent examples of this tension. In all these cases, the CoG reaffirmed its role as the long-standing defender of ‘Greekness’, of authentic cultural heritage and inviolable national identity (Fokas 2010, p. 182; Roudometof 2011, p. 106). Instead of emphasising the modernising trends of Greek society or demonstrating an openness to the secular aspects of Greek society as a public religion (Casanova 1994), the public interventions of the CoG have traditionally been mostly focused on issues of ‘national interest’ and on various social and moral issues related to the religious and cultural ethos of Greek society (Payne 2003, pp. 268–69; see also Roudometof 2011). Thus, it is hardly surprising that, while issues of national interest or matters of church–state relations are traditionally in the foreground of the CoG’s public rhetoric, rather little attention is paid to matters of human rights, economic inequality, and social justice (Dragonas 2013, p. 127).

In this respect, the recent experience of the financial and social crisis could be a crucial factor with regard to the eventual transformation of the public attitude toward the CoG. As already noted above, the severe financial crisis of the Greek state during the last decade has had major consequences for the Greek political system and society. Greek society was deeply affected by austerity measures, and Greek society still suffers from high unemployment and financial instability. Against the backdrop of austerity measures and social instability, it is argued that the CoG has not dramatically altered its rhetoric and has not seriously engaged with the structural economic, political, and institutional causes of the crisis, both domestically and internationally. During the crisis, the CoG abstained from elaborating a detailed and coherent theological response to the crisis and appeared even less willing, on the political level, to directly confront the state by judging governmental actions regarding the overall administration of the crisis and its consequences (Makris and Meichanetsidis 2018, pp. 250–51, 253). However, this is not to imply that the CoG remained unaffected by the crisis. On the contrary, instead of calling into question the deeper economic and institutional roots or questioning the insufficiencies of the institutional and domestic economic system, the discourse of the CoG tended to focus generally on Greek society as a whole. The church stressed the ‘spiritual’ and ‘ethical’ dimensions of the crisis and remained committed to the alleviation of the social symptoms of the humanitarian crisis affecting Greek society through a well-organised network dedicated to social welfare and public charity (Makris and Bekridakis 2013, pp. 120–21, 123).

On the other hand, while anti-modernist and anti-European sentiments are routinely singled out as a common trait of the CoG and as an ineradicable element of its public rhetoric, it appears that, during the crisis, the CoG adopted a pro-European stance regarding financial policies and austerity measures, as well as toward the general framework of the participation of Greece in the EU (Kessareas 2019). From this point of view, it is crucial to understand how the CoG responded to contemporary social and political challenges by taking into account the social and political context of the economic crisis as ‘both a moment of challenge and an opportunity for the [CoG] to demonstrate its social relevance in contemporary Greek society’ (Molokotos-Liederman 2016, p. 14). In this respect, the distinction between established church and public religion seems particularly useful from a methodological point of view, since it is applied to the given political and social reality of the Greek context. Specifically, it helps to explore, in an empirically informative way, how the CoG responds to contemporary social and political challenges and how the CoG understands itself in a rapidly changing domestic and international environment characterised by processes of democratisation and modernisation, the growth of religious pluralism, and the cooperation of the Greek state with the European Union and various international actors.

### 3. Data, Methodology, and Research Questions

The exploration of the political discourse of the CoG during the period 2015–2019, a time when Greek society was faced with acute financial problems, is carried out through the study of public interventions by representatives of the CoG (e.g., the archbishop, metropolitans, and other members of the clergy as well as lay representatives) as well as ex-members of the clergy (e.g., retired metropolitans) who may retain an influential role in the public sphere through their presence in the media. These public interventions were related to the context of the crisis or focused on different aspects of contemporary Greek society. The way in which the CoG managed issues produced by the financial crisis underlines broader aspects of its political presence and its social role. In this context, it is crucial to understand whether the CoG was interested in those issues or chose to deal with them indirectly via references to social domains that were influenced by the crisis. Moreover, it is necessary to systematically map the issues that captivated the attention of the CoG. These main interests were explored from the perspective of invested meaning, that is, from the point of view of frames that were promoted by the CoG in order to trigger specific perceptions and evaluations of the public. Through the monitoring of adopted frames, the current study aimed to explore whether the CoG performed a dual role as an established church and public religion. The way that the CoG chooses to approach a particular issue is not irrelevant to its self-understanding. On the contrary, it reveals specific self-images and assumptions. Therefore, this study paid special attention to the political and societal institutions that the CoG addressed. The main hypothesis was that the respective institutional interlocutor would reveal different self-determinations of the CoG, that is, either as an established church or as a public religion.

The choice of the period under examination—from January 2015 to January 2019—was based on two main criteria. First, for the first time in Greece, a left-wing government emerged, formed by the coalition of SYRIZA and the small party of ‘Independent Greeks’ (Anexártiti Éllines/AN.EL), which belongs to the broader right-wing political family, but shared with SYRIZA its anti-austerity position. Second, although SYRIZA defended the separation of church and state as a major programmatic goal, the government carefully avoided a direct confrontation with the church, recognised its active role during the social crisis and even propelled an intensive collaboration with the CoG regarding the meal subsidies program (Molokotos-Liederman 2019, pp. 53–54). However, this is not to say that the relation between the government and the CoG was entirely peaceful, given, among other factors, the support of AN.EL for several of the CoG’s positions. During the specific period, a considerable number of issues of strong interest to the CoG as an institution arose in the political agenda, in contrast to the previous years, provoking intense debates between the main representatives of the Greek political system and the CoG. The issues at the heart of the debate were, among others, state–church relations, religious education, constitutional revision (with reference to the institutional role of the CoG), and issues such as the ‘cohabitation agreement’, cremation, and gender-identity laws. Included among these issues were cases such as the ‘Prespa Agreement’ (an agreement that regulated several pending issues between Greece and North Macedonia, among which was the commonly accepted name of the neighboring country) and that of the migration/refugee crisis, in which the CoG intervened as an institution that represents and seeks to safeguard national identity and cultural heritage.

To systematically explore and elaborate the content of the CoG discourse, a quantitative content analysis was conducted. A list of various types of texts was compiled, derived from two main sources. The first of these was the official website of the CoG ([www.ecclesia.gr](http://www.ecclesia.gr), accessed on 17 March 2022), where a considerable number of texts are published. In this case, all the related interventions by Archbishop Ieronymos (e.g., speeches and statements), press releases, suggestions, and announcements of the Holy Synod and of the Standing Holy Synod, as well as the content of the official magazine of the CoG, entitled *Ecclesia* (‘Church’), were monitored. *Ecclesia* is a monthly publication which, among other things, includes official texts and speeches of the CoG. This first source mainly explored a more formal version of the CoG’s public discourse, given that it solely includes official positions and interventions. As such, a

second, less formal source was also included, that of the CoG's public discourse expressed through the press. The aim of this selection was to gain a more holistic view of the public interventions of the CoG's representatives. This precondition was made necessary by the fact that the official website of the CoG very rarely covers the opinions and interventions of metropolitans or other members of the clergy. Although in most cases those statements reflect unofficial positions, the public discourse of the CoG's members may have a considerable social and political impact. To this end, we additionally explored how two newspapers with significant daily circulation and different ideological and political stances echo the social impact of the political discourse of the CoG. We strongly emphasise that it does not fall within the scope of this research to analyse the relevant journalistic discourse or the frames used by the journalists. Our main intent is simply to record how the two newspapers cover the various statements of the representatives of the CoG (e.g., thematic categories, statements, framing) in order to highlight possible differences between them. The agenda promoted by the press and the media in general is often influenced by their ideological orientation, their socio-cultural perspectives and their ties with specific political parties (e.g., political parallelism) (McCombs and Bell 1996, pp. 93–110; El Issawi 2021, p. 865). This condition appears to be of considerable importance in the Greek case (Hallin and Mancini 2004; Iosifidis and Boucas 2015). The two selected newspapers are *Kathimerini* ([www.kathimerini.gr](http://www.kathimerini.gr), accessed on 17 March 2022) and *Efimerida Syntakton* (EFSYN) ([www.efsyn.gr](http://www.efsyn.gr), accessed on 17 March 2022). *Kathimerini* has a conservative ideological stance and expresses a center-right political agenda, while the EFSYN has a progressive ideological profile and expresses a center-left political agenda.<sup>1</sup> *Kathimerini* is the highest-selling newspaper in Greece in terms of print circulation, while EFSYN comes third in total numbers but first among the newspapers standing on the center-left of the political spectrum.<sup>2</sup>

Within the framework of the current analysis, a coding protocol was created that included forty-two variables, such as: text definition categories (e.g., text source, length, category, publication year); talking head characteristics (status in the hierarchy of the CoG, expression of official position); thematic categories (in total, fourteen different categories) and sub-thematic categories of reference (in total, sixty-one sub-thematic categories); mode of reference to institutions (in total, twenty different institutions were included, such as the government, political parties, society, the EU, other institutions, church, etc.); and, finally, the frames monitored for each case. The unit of analysis was that of the main thematic category discussed by representatives of the CoG.

In total, 769 texts were statistically analysed.<sup>3</sup> This number includes 597 newspaper articles (361 from *Kathimerini* and 236 from EFSYN) and 172 official documents of the CoG (e.g., Press Releases, Official Statements, the *Ecclesia* magazine) derived from its official website. As a result of our analysis, 1062 different cases were monitored (409 derived from texts from the official website of the CoG and 653 from the two newspapers). The great majority (93.2%) of these cases featured at least one talking head, and only a few cases (6.8%) were derived from press releases. In total, 1102 public interventions by CoG representatives were monitored, which included 511 statements from Archbishop Ieronymos, 426 from metropolitans of the CoG, and 165 from other CoG representatives (from both clergy and lay people officially related to the CoG).

Finally, in order to ensure common perceptions and evaluations of the archive material among the researchers, pilot research was conducted that covered 10% of the texts gathered. After the completion of the pilot research, the protocol was finalised.

The coding of the agenda was based on a combination of inductive and deductive qualitative and quantitative content analysis processes (Elo and Kyngäs 2008). This phase, inspired by grounded theory techniques (Corbin and Strauss 2008), was based initially on the free coding of categories and, after completing the coding process, on the organisation of these categories under higher order headings. Through this process, we were able to abstract 14 main and 61 sub-thematic categories. The main thematic categories were as follows: (1) 'societal issues' (e.g., homosexuality, gender identity, church charity, cohabitation agreement, unemployment); (2) 'church–state relations' (e.g., church property,

constitutional revision, clergy payroll); (3) 'refugee-migration issues' (e.g., impact on Greek society, role of the EU); (4) 'education issues' (e.g., religious education); (5) 'economic crisis' (e.g., role of political system, EU); (6) 'European Union Member States'; (7) 'political system'; (8) 'national identity' (e.g., the CoG's historical role or Christian civilisation); (9) 'demographic' (e.g., depopulation issues); (10) 'national issues' (e.g., the 'Prespa Agreement'); (11) 'international issues' (e.g., relations with other nations); (12) 'current affairs'; (13) 'religious issues–non-CoG' (this category includes other religious doctrines, such as Islam, as well as the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople and other Orthodox churches); and (14) 'other'.

Frame analysis was the methodological tool used for the treatment of the above data. As already shown in a series of relevant works (Scheufele 1999; Scheufele and Nisbet 2008; Druckman and Nelson 2003; Borah 2011), the analysis of frames helps to articulate a better understanding of the rhetorical strategies adopted by actors in their attempt to promote concrete goals. According to Entman's (1993, p. 52) well-known definition, frames 'define problems—determine what a causal agent is doing with what costs and benefits, usually measured in terms of common cultural values; diagnose causes—identify the forces creating the problem; make moral judgments—evaluate causal agents and their effects; and suggest remedies—offer and justify treatments for the problems and predict their likely effects.' The narrative structure of a frame is built through a specific definition, a causal attribution, and a proposed remedy (for the Greek case, see Kountouri and Nikolaidou 2019). Three framing processes offer an adequate description of this narrative structure: the configuration frame (the problem definition), the diagnosis frame (the causes of a problem), and the prognosis frame (the proposed solution(s) to a problem). The main thematic categories were utilised to identify five master frames. Based on this assumption, we decided to articulate the frames as follows.

The *identity frame* helps with the identification of the 'us' and the 'them' (Johnston and Noakes 2005) and offers legitimacy. Using this frame enabled us to think about the intervention of the CoG through a legitimizing framework and its role via institutional self-determination. In this frame, we indexed texts of the CoG in terms of its role as a custodian of intellectual and cultural heritage. The positive framing device category included 'legitimation' (i.e., the CoG as a historical/traditional actor) and 'institutional role' (i.e., an actor intervening based on the existing institutional and legal framework).

The *blame frame* refers to the causal attribution of responsibility for a given problem or situation. This is used to detect causes and responsibilities, search for culprits, and identify victims (Snow 2001, p. 40). Essentially, the causal attribution of responsibility challenges problem management. As pointed out by Iyengar (1991, 1996), political news coverage in the US predominantly relies on episodic framing, which elicits individualistic attributions of responsibility for social problems and diverts attention from the wider political and economic causes and remedies of social problems. Reporting is limited to day-to-day events and circumstances and often fails to employ thematic frames that provide the historic, social, and economic context of an issue. In the framework of the current analysis, this type of framing could take the form of either a 'collective' or an 'individual/particular social group' blame frame.

The *moral frame* is connected to the consequences frame, which emphasises the ways in which different issues affect people (Dirikx and Gelders 2010; Semetko and Valkenburg 2000). This context placed the issue within the framework of ethical standards and values in order to interpret the alteration of Greek society as a result of the impact of contemporary problems.

The *prognosis frame* responds to actions that need to be undertaken to address the problem at hand. This frame works in the search for a possible solution and the possible strategic actions that it exposes from its structure in the problematic situation (Scheufele and Nisbet 2008). The framing process is understood as 'an organising principle that transforms fragmentary or incidental information into a structured and meaningful policy problem, in which a solution is implicitly or explicitly enclosed' (Verloo 2005, p. 20). It can either take the form of a 'policy proposal' or a perception that no amendment should be

made with regard to a given social condition, legal situation, or institutional settlement ('retaining of the status quo').

The *mobilisation frame* reflects the inner logic of social action and its rhetorical form. It indicates the various procedures through which 'agency' is constructed, that is, active participation in collective actions. According to Benford and Snow (2000, p. 617), motivational framing '[...] provides a "call to arms" or rationale for engaging in ameliorative collective action, including the construction of appropriate vocabularies of motive.' It signals the transition from a specific point of view regarding an issue to the creation of an adequate vocabulary that serves the undertaking of a specific course of action. Regarding the public interventions of the CoG, it could identify vocabularies of motives, such as those of 'reward,' 'alarmism/scaremongering', 'solidarity', 'conflict', and 'altruism'.

#### 4. Discussion and Findings

In order to provide a more comprehensive view of the research findings, the included figures and tables incorporate a major distinction: that of the source origin of the analysed text as either 'Official Church' or 'Press' publications.<sup>4</sup> Although statements and interventions from CoG representatives are included in both cases, two major differentiations made this division necessary. First, as mentioned earlier, official church texts can, a priori, be considered official positions of the CoG, a parameter that is not necessarily the case for items published through the press, given that, sometimes, members of the clergy may express personal opinions. Second, although we monitored only the statements from the representatives of the CoG, even in those cases, newspapers might publish the statements in a fragmented way and therefore influence their evaluation. The only exception is that of Figure 1, where the division between the two newspapers is also presented. This division aims to monitor potential differentiations between the two newspapers given that their different ideological orientation might result in a more pluralistic agenda.

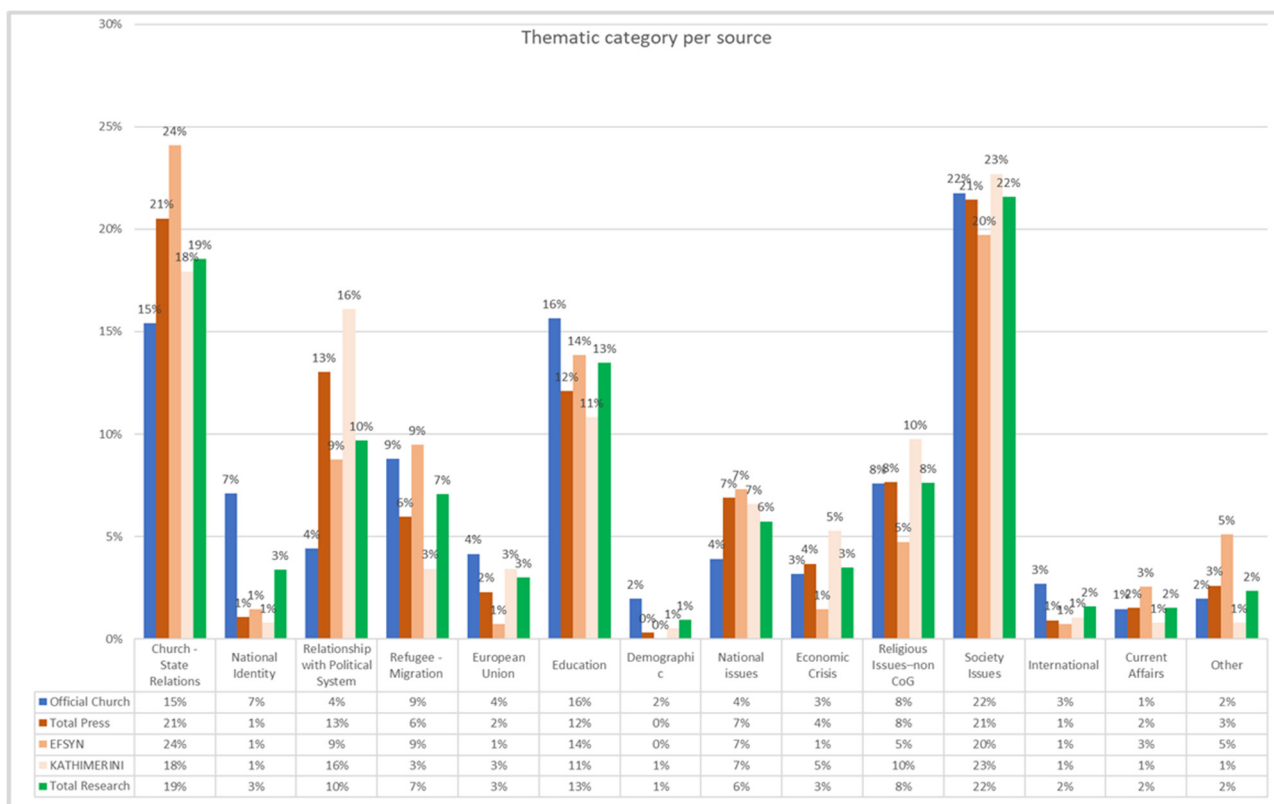
##### 4.1. Main Issues Discussed by the Church of Greece

Figure 1 presents the main thematic categories discussed by representatives of the CoG, while Figure 2 displays only the most referenced sub-thematic categories ( $\geq 2\%$  of the total number of references), given that a considerable number of them were very rarely referenced. Based on the research findings, some very interesting results are brought to light.

A first comment has to do with the broad spectrum of issues in which the CoG intervened. As can be seen in Figure 1, the public discourse of the CoG was not restricted to 'strict religious issues', as in the cases of 'church–state relations' (19%), 'relationship with political system' (10%), and 'religious issues–non-CoG' (8%), but included a wide range of issues of general interest, such as 'societal issues' (22%), 'refugee-migration' (7%), or 'national issues' (6%). To a large extent, this is related to the identification of the CoG as both an established church and a public religion with a strong influential role within Greek society. However, and contrary to this image, the CoG intervened very rarely in issues related to the economic crisis. As shown in Figure 1, only a limited number of cases were found relating to the main thematic category of 'economic crisis' (3%), while the same trend was also found when referring to the 'EU' (3%), which also played an influential role in the manipulation of the Greek economic crisis. In addition, the CoG avoided intervening directly in and interpreting all the societal and political conditions that resulted in the emergence of the crisis and its consequential effects. This is mainly based on limited references to issues related to the demographic problem in Greece (1%), but also to several related sub-thematic categories (e.g., unemployment, the role of politicians, or civilians in crisis), which were almost absent from the research findings. Overall, what seems to be of interest is the fact that the CoG largely promoted a 'traditional agenda' in the public sphere, since the crisis and its social consequences only slightly captured the CoG's attention. The only exception was that of charity (7%). By contrast, items that traditionally are of high importance for the CoG, such as 'church–state relations' (which includes issues such as 'constitutional revision' (6%), 'clergy payroll' (6%), or issues related to church property) and



‘religious education’ (10%), as well as moral and socio-political issues (e.g., ‘family issues’, ‘divorce’, ‘national identity’), retained an important role in the CoG’s public discourse.

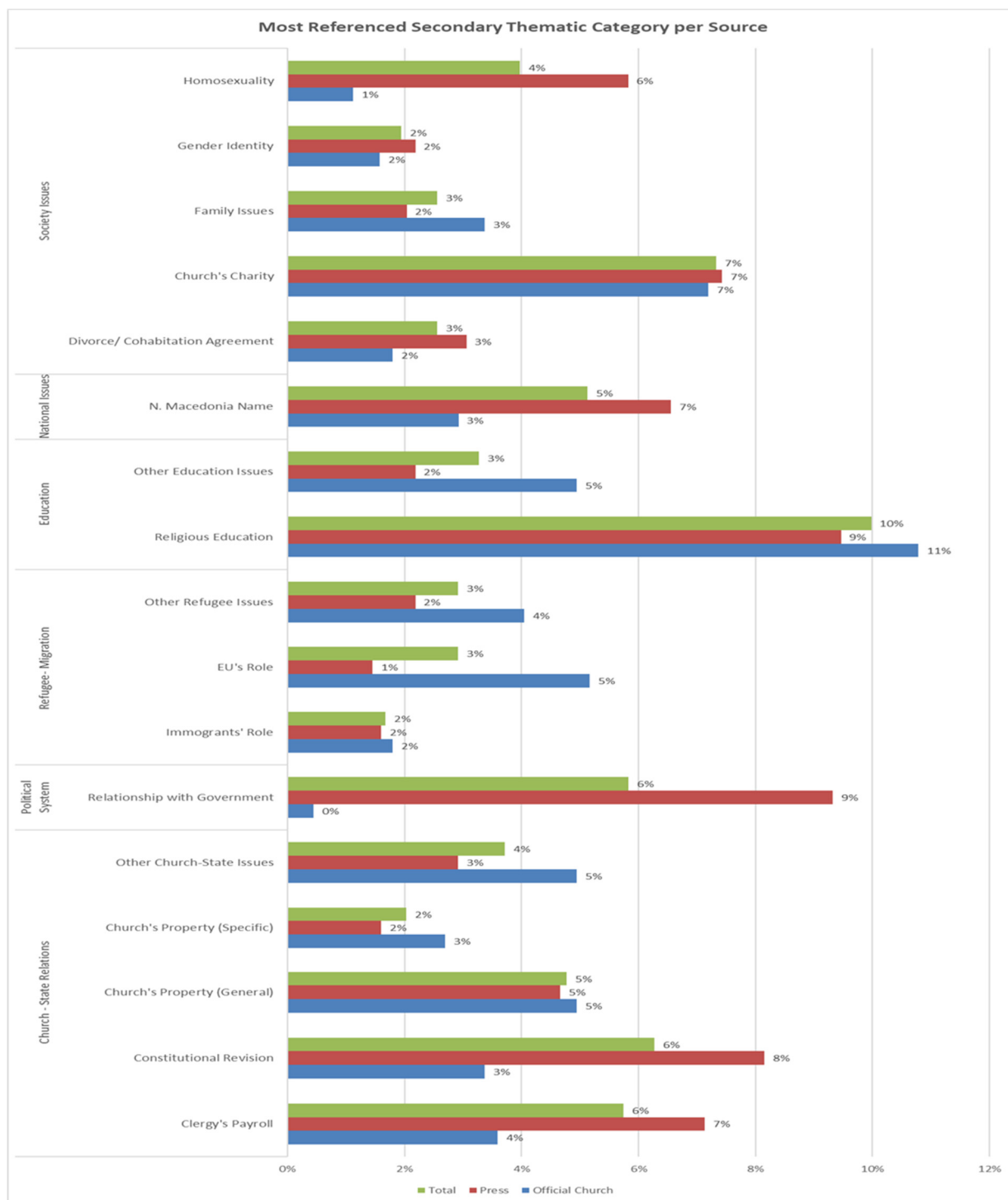


**Figure 1.** Thematic category per source. Source: Official website of the CoG ([www.ecclesia.gr](http://www.ecclesia.gr), accessed on 17 March 2022) and newspapers (EFSYN and Kathimerini). Where the height of the bars with the same figures is slightly differentiated, this is due to the value rounding process performed by the statistical program used for the current research (IBM SPSS).

The CoG intervened not only in issues that, to a large extent, were characterised by a common settlement between the CoG and the state (e.g., ‘church–state relations’) and could take the form of deliberation under a commonly accepted framework. It also intervened in a number of moral and socio-political issues that traditionally provoke social conflict and intense public debates, such as, for example, ‘national issues’ (e.g., the ‘Prespa Agreement’ 7%), ‘societal issues’ (e.g., ‘homosexuality’ 6%), ‘relationship with political system’ (10%), or ‘refugee-migration matters’ (7%).

The distinction between established church and public religion can be further explored with reference to official church documents and those of the press. Although, in several cases, the agendas promoted by the official church and press were similar, there were some noteworthy differentiations. The official church thematic agenda was more oriented on issues that were mainly related to the parameters of the CoG as an established church, such as ‘education’ (16%) and ‘religious issues–non-CoG’ (8%). The only noteworthy exception was that of ‘church—state relations,’ on which the official church focused less extensively than the press did. In contrast to this, the press tended to focus more extensively on issues that, to a large extent, were related to the CoG as a public religion by stressing the “conflictual” character of the relationship between the Greek state and the CoG. The press more frequently promoted cases such as ‘national issues,’ the ‘Prespa Agreement’ (7%), the sub-thematic category of ‘homosexuality’, and, finally, ‘relationship with political system’ (which refers mainly to the government). This last parameter is of considerable importance. What these two graphs seem to demonstrate is a lack of intention by the official church to address the political system and, especially, the government (since references to the

opposition are almost absent). However, a completely different image is evident through the press, where a considerable number of references suggest this specific parameter. One possible interpretation is that the 'official' CoG is seeking to retain an 'established church' approach in relation to representatives of the political system, a condition that is followed less when a more unofficial discourse is expressed through the newspapers. A further exception is evident here, that of the 'refugee-migration' category, which is more commonly referenced through official church documents.



**Figure 2.** Most referenced secondary thematic categories per source. Source: official website of the CoG ([www.ecclesia.gr](http://www.ecclesia.gr), accessed on 17 March 2022) and newspapers (EFSYN and Kathimerini). Where the height of the bars with the same figures is slightly differentiated, this is due to the value rounding process performed by the statistical program used for the current research (IBM SPSS).

As for the differentiations presented between the two newspapers, it is worth noting that in most categories, similar trends are monitored. A notable exception concerns the category “Relationship with the Political System”. Although both newspapers focus more intensively on this issue than the official church, the relevant figure in Kathimerini is considerably higher (16%) compared to EFSYN (9%). A possible interpretation is that the

representatives of the CoG choose to address in a less formal way the political system and the government through a more ‘friendly’ newspaper with a conservative political orientation. By contrast, although both newspapers focus more intensively than the official church on ‘church–state Relations’, that figure is considerably higher in EFSYN (24% comparing to 18% in Kathimerini). This is more or less to be expected, since this category includes issues that traditionally capture the attention of left-leaning citizens and political parties (e.g., constitutional revision, clergy payroll).

Another major aim of the current research was to monitor and evaluate the framing adopted by the CoG and its representatives in relation to political and societal issues. This kind of analysis would help to present a more thorough and concrete interpretation of the research questions posed. In each case, we had the chance to monitor up to three different framings. However, in the great majority of cases (approximately 89%), only one framing was monitored. Table 1 presents the framing adopted in the main thematic categories, divided by source origin. As can be seen, the ‘mobilisation frame’ (total research 49%) is the most prominent for both the official church (43%) and the press (55%), although there is a considerable differentiation between the two. A similar trend is also evident when referring to the ‘identity frame’ (total research 17%), which, although very common among official church cases (23%), is rather limited when referring to the presentation of the official positions of the CoG through the press (13%). In addition, a small differentiation is also evident regarding the ‘moral frame’ (total research 10%), since this is more common in the discourse of the CoG (11%) than in the discourse monitored through the press (8%). Finally, the ‘blame frame’ (total research 8%) and ‘prognosis frame’ (total research 16%) present similar trends for the official church and the press. A more thorough analysis regarding the press findings indicates that the mobilisation frame is more frequently present in Kathimerini (62%) compared to EFSYN (39%), while EFSYN uses the critical ‘blame frame’ (11%) and ‘identity frame’ (19%) more frequently compared to Kathimerini (3% and 10% respectively). All other framing categories present similar trends between the two newspapers.

**Table 1.** Framing per main thematic category.

	Official Church					Press				
	Identity Frame	Blame Frame	Prognosis Frame	Moral Frame	Mobilisation Frame	Identity Frame	Blame Frame	Prognosis Frame	Moral Frame	Mobilisation Frame
Church—State Relations	24%	8%	32%	3%	32%	11%	9%	36%	0%	43%
National Identity	76%	0%	0%	12%	12%	63%	0%	0%	13%	25%
Relationship with Political System	18%	0%	0%	0%	82%	18%	8%	1%	1%	71%
Refugee—Migration	2%	20%	7%	17%	54%	5%	12%	2%	15%	66%
European Union	21%	11%	5%	32%	32%	16%	11%	0%	32%	42%
Education	25%	6%	33%	4%	32%	17%	1%	28%	5%	49%
Demographic	7%	14%	21%	14%	43%	0%	50%	0%	0%	50%
National Issues	24%	12%	12%	0%	53%	21%	11%	21%	0%	47%
Economic Crisis	8%	38%	0%	15%	38%	0%	0%	4%	22%	74%
Religious Issues—non-CoG	31%	6%	16%	6%	41%	15%	4%	17%	6%	59%
Society Issues	16%	1%	10%	20%	53%	7%	7%	10%	18%	59%
International	9%	0%	0%	27%	64%	17%	0%	17%	0%	67%
Current Affairs	17%	0%	0%	0%	83%	33%	11%	11%	0%	44%
Other	13%	38%	0%	0%	50%	29%	12%	0%	6%	53%
<b>Total</b>	<b>23%</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>16%</b>	<b>11%</b>	<b>43%</b>	<b>13%</b>	<b>7%</b>	<b>17%</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>55%</b>

As mentioned above, the identity frame aims to create a differentiation between ‘us’ and ‘them’, as well as to offer institutional legitimisation. In this case, this pertains to the CoG as the ‘prevailing religion’ in Greece, a framing approach that, to a large extent, is closely related to the role of the CoG as an established church. As a result, the category of identity frame is seen to be more prominent in issues that might interfere with the prevailing role of the CoG by calling into question its hegemonic status from a legal/constitutional and political point of view, such as ‘church–state relations’, ‘national identity’, ‘EU’, ‘education’, ‘national issues’, or matters related to ‘religious issues—non-CoG’ and doctrine. The aforementioned trend is mainly evident among official church interventions and is far less

evident in the press. A similar interpretation can be given to the category of moral framing. Although in most thematic categories, no major differentiations could be detected, moral framing was more common within official church public discourse, a condition that is mainly related to the complete absence of moral framing among the cases of ‘church-state relations’ presented through the Press.

In the same vein, the prognosis frame presupposes a bargaining procedure between the CoG and the state and, as such, is related, to a large extent, to the role of the CoG as an established church. With only a few exceptions (e.g., ‘refugee-migration’, ‘EU’, ‘national issues’), we cannot detect major differentiations between the two sources. However, another comment should be made. The CoG used the prognosis frame mainly when it came to speaking of ‘traditional issues’ or, alternatively, when it became involved in long-lasting issues on which it had well-established positions, as in cases of ‘church–state relations’, ‘education’, and matters related to ‘religious issues–non-CoG’ and doctrine.

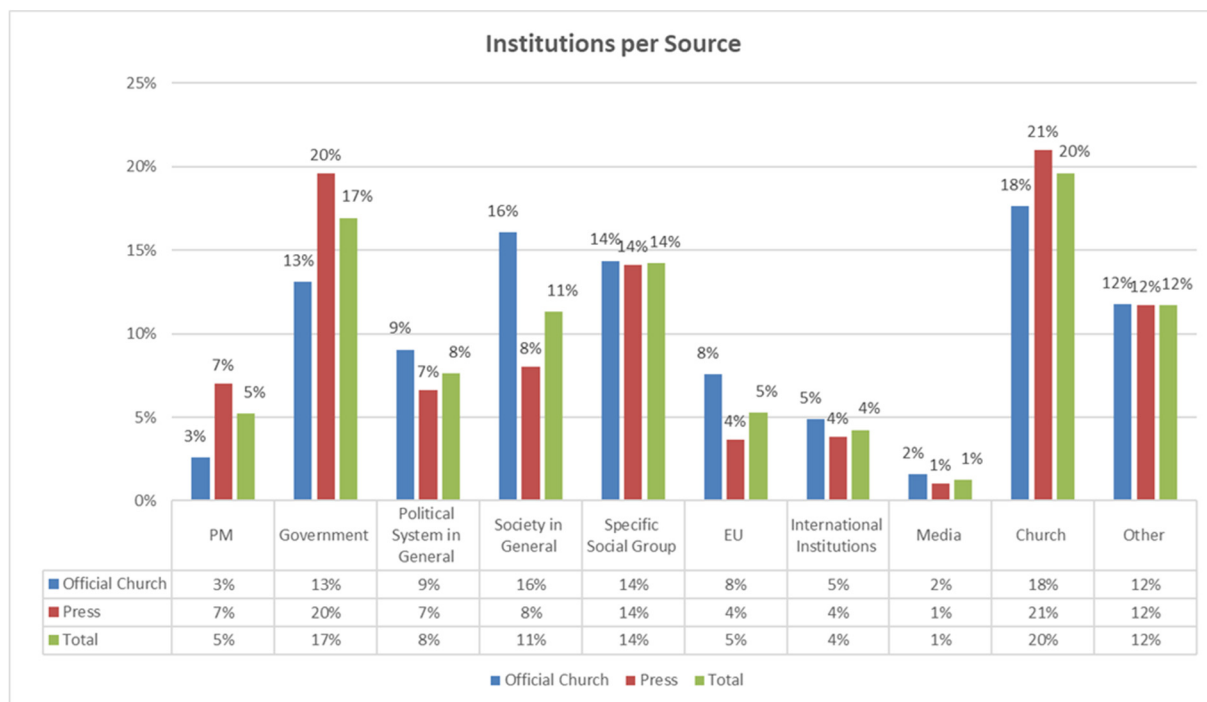
An opposite trend was made evident when considering the mobilisation frame, which mainly refers to active participation in collective actions, a condition that, to a large extent, is related to the role of the CoG as a public actor. Mobilisation can be seen as the prevalent category for both the official church and the press, since it constitutes the main framing approach in most categories, such as ‘relationship with political system’, ‘economic crisis’, ‘refugee-migration’, ‘societal issues’, and ‘national issues’. Except for the categories ‘relationship with political system’, ‘national issues’, and ‘current affairs’, in all other categories, the mobilisation frame was more common among press cases than those of the official church. As mentioned earlier, the mobilisation frame includes several sub-categories, such as ‘reward’, ‘alarmism/scaremongering’, ‘solidarity’, ‘conflict’, and ‘altruism’. Given that this specific category is the most prevalent and includes completely different modes of framing, a more thorough analysis should be made. As derived from the research findings, the official church and the press used the mobilisation frame in different ways. On the one hand, the public interventions of the official church were mainly characterised by a positive interpretation (82% of mobilisation cases belong to the categories of ‘solidarity’, ‘reward’, and ‘altruism’). On the other hand, a negative interpretation was much more evident among press cases, since 44% of mobilisation cases belong to the categories of ‘alarmism/scaremongering’ and ‘conflict’, an insight that verifies the tendency of CoG representatives to promote the aspect of the CoG as a public actor through the press.

The least-monitored framing approach is that of the blame frame, which is mainly related to the role of the CoG as a public actor, an evaluation that derives from the fact that the blame frame aims to attribute responsibility to a given agent for a particular problem or situation. As can be seen in Table 1, although the average numbers for the official church and the press are almost identical, considerable differences can be detected when focusing on the main thematic categories. The blame frame is mainly used by the official church in cases related to ‘refugee-migration’, ‘education’, and ‘economic crisis’, while the thematic categories of ‘relationship with political system’ and ‘societal issues’ are more evident for the press. However, another issue seems to be of interest when referring to the blame frame. As shown in Table 1, the blame frame is mainly used in those thematic categories where an international dimension is evident, as in the cases of ‘refugee-migration’ (with the role of the EU in the manipulation of the crisis to be a major issue of discussion), ‘EU’, ‘national issues’ (such as the ‘Prespa Agreement’), and finally, ‘economic crisis’, with the involvement of the EU and several other international institutions (e.g., IMF, ECB) of major importance.

Based on the above analysis, we can argue that the CoG’s representatives promoted both roles, that of an established church and a public religion. The aforementioned findings illustrate that through its official channels, the CoG more intensively—although not exclusively—promoted its role as an established church, while through the press, it promoted itself as a public religion.

#### 4.2. Main Institutions Discussed by the Church of Greece

In the framework of the current analysis, the references of the CoG to several political and societal institutions were also monitored (Figure 3) in order to evaluate the public presence of the CoG as both an established church and a public religion. In each case, it was possible to monitor up to five institutions. References to a great number of the twenty institutions included as research parameters, and more specifically to the president of the republic and the political parties, were almost absent. As such, Figure 3 presents those institutions that gathered a considerable number of references in the CoG’s public discourse.



**Figure 3.** Institutions per source. Source: Official website of the CoG ([www.ecclesia.gr](http://www.ecclesia.gr), accessed on 17 March 2022) and newspapers (EFSYN and Kathimerini). Where the height of the bars with the same figures is slightly differentiated, this is due to the value rounding process performed by the statistical program used for the current research (IBM SPSS).

The multifaceted role of the CoG in contemporary Greek society was mainly verified by the fact that through its public discourse, the CoG addressed a considerable number of institutions. Among those, references to political institutions, such as the government (17%), the PM (5%), or the political system in general (8%), were very common. In the same vein, a considerable number of references were targeted at society, either in general (11%) or as a form of a specific social group (14%). In addition, a considerable number of references were made to several other institutions (12%), such as the judiciary, local administration, NGOs, trade unions, civil society organisations, and others, while at a more limited level, the CoG also referred to the EU (5%) or other international institutions and organisations (4%). Finally, of utmost importance is that, to a considerable degree, the political discourse of the CoG was self-referential (20%), as it tended to present its own opinions and positions on several issues. This observation is compatible with the perception of the CoG as a public religion.

The division between official church and press reveals an interesting finding. While the official church more intensively addressed society and the EU, its rhetoric was less targeted at political institutions. A completely different image was evident when referring to the interventions of CoG representatives through the press. In this case, a more intense emphasis was given to political institutions, such as the PM or the government, while references to society or international institutions were considerably fewer. This last observation is in accordance with that made above regarding the CoG as both an established church

and public religion. More specifically, through official church interventions, an attempt to preserve the settlement between the CoG and the state was evident, given that the CoG addressed political institutions less intensively, a condition that, to a large extent, was different from references to interventions through the press, where references to political institutions were more common.

Table 2 presents the framing adopted when referring to institutions. Overall, the total percentages are almost identical to those presented in Table 1. The mobilisation frame is the most common category (total research 51%), although it is more commonly used among press (56%) than official church (43%) cases, a condition that, to a large extent, refers to the CoG as a public religion. This is a condition that is mainly promoted through the press and, to a lesser extent, through the official church. All institutions presented through the press are characterised by a mobilisation frame in a prevalent way (percentages range from 46% to 62%). By contrast, in the case of the official church, a different image is evident, since the respective percentages range between 23% and 60%. In addition, as derived from the analysis of secondary framings, official church statements are mainly characterised by a positive usage of the mobilisation frame, given that 79% are characterised by ‘solidarity’, ‘reward’, or ‘altruism’, while the respective percentage for press cases is 56%, since 44% of press cases are characterised by ‘alarmism/scaremongering’ and ‘conflict’.

**Table 2.** Framing per Institution.

	Official Church					Press				
	Identity Frame	Blame Frame	Prognosis Frame	Moral Frame	Mobilisation Frame	Identity Frame	Blame Frame	Prognosis Frame	Moral Frame	Mobilisation Frame
<b>PM</b>	12%	12%	36%	0%	40%	13%	8%	20%	0%	60%
<b>Government</b>	17%	5%	34%	6%	39%	13%	9%	23%	4%	51%
<b>Political System in General</b>	28%	10%	18%	6%	38%	18%	7%	21%	6%	48%
<b>Society in General</b>	26%	11%	8%	20%	35%	11%	6%	14%	15%	54%
<b>Specific Social Group</b>	17%	6%	11%	12%	54%	6%	7%	9%	16%	62%
<b>EU</b>	20%	16%	15%	18%	32%	15%	14%	10%	15%	46%
<b>International Institutions</b>	10%	12%	10%	10%	60%	11%	4%	15%	11%	59%
<b>Media</b>	31%	38%	8%	0%	23%	7%	29%	0%	7%	57%
<b>Church</b>	25%	5%	18%	7%	45%	15%	7%	16%	4%	58%
<b>Other</b>	24%	3%	19%	4%	50%	16%	7%	15%	3%	58%
<b>Total</b>	22%	8%	17%	10%	43%	13%	8%	16%	7%	56%

The blame frame (total research 8%) also constitutes a framing approach that is mainly related to the role of the CoG as a public religion. As shown in Table 2, no major differences could be detected in terms of reference to political or societal parameters. However, a noteworthy exception was that of the EU, where both official church and press documents revealed a considerable level of blaming among the CoG’s public interventions.

The identity frame (total research 18%), which constitutes the second most common framing category, is mainly related to the role of the CoG as an established church. As shown in Table 2, it was more frequently used in official church cases (22%) than in those of the press (13%). In more detail, the CoG more intensively promoted its role as an established church given that, in most cases, it more frequently used an identity frame when referring to political institutions (e.g., government) and society (both in general or to a particular social group). This last observation seems also to hold true in the case of the prognosis frame. The parameter of negotiation is quite important among the CoG’s public interventions, given that a prognosis frame was used in a considerable number of cases (16%) on an almost equal basis by the official church (17%) and the press (16%). However, what is of special interest is the use of the prognosis frame more intensively on behalf of the official church when referring to most political institutions, such as the government and the PM.

Finally, the moral frame (total research 8%) was another characteristic of the CoG’s political discourse, although it was not as common as the previous framings mentioned above. The moral frame mainly promotes the role of the CoG as a public religion and, to a large extent, refers to contemporary social and political changes and their consequences for social identities and ethical values. As such, it is somewhat expected to be more evident

among the official church interventions than those intermediated through the press. Under these preconditions, the moral frame was mainly accompanied by institutions that either are affected by (society at large) or affect (EU) contemporary values and traditions (e.g., family, religion).

## 5. Conclusions

The above analysis shows that the Church of Greece (CoG) intervened in a considerable number of issues that were not strictly related to religion but were also matters of general political and societal interest. The promoted agenda was largely targeted at issues that are traditionally of major importance for the CoG, such as church-state relations, religious education, national identity, society's moral values, and modes of citizen behavior. As for the relation between the discourse of the CoG and the context of the Greek financial crisis, it appears that the social and economic consequences of the crisis were only an indirect object of interest and cause for public intervention by the CoG. The main issues related to the socioeconomic crisis in Greece (e.g., unemployment, the role of international organisations) constituted a limited field of reference. The general interest on behalf of the CoG was incited by government initiatives that aimed to affect the status quo and the general 'settlement' between the church and the state. This condition was evidenced on societal (e.g., modernisation of society), political (e.g., the 'Prespa Agreement'), and cultural (e.g., national identity, refugee-migration) levels, among others. In this context, the only exception is 'charity', a result that provides evidence for the idea that charitable activity constitutes one of the CoG's main responses to the social consequences of the crisis (see the preceding analysis in this paper, pp. 7, 15).

As for the relation between the church and the political system, the concrete stance of the CoG is primarily connected with its double role as both an established church and a public religion, a condition that was also verified by our research findings. On the one hand, the CoG, which constitutes an institution that cooperates smoothly with the state and tries to avoid intense conflicts, can be considered an established church. Although not exclusively, the CoG as an established church is promoted to a higher level through official church interventions, as monitored through its official website. To this end, the CoG uses framings to enhance that image more intensively, such as identity or prognosis, or even those aspects of the mobilisation frame aiming to promote a harmonious relationship between church and state (e.g., 'solidarity', 'reward', and 'altruism').

In addition, through its official channel of communication, the CoG less frequently addresses political institutions and more extensively addresses other institutions, such as society or the EU, aiming to hold a more differentiated, and even cautious stance. On the other hand, the CoG also promotes itself as a public religion, given that in several cases, it acts as an interest group characterised by a conflictual agenda. In this case, a moral frame and a mobilisation frame and, more precisely, the conflictual aspects of the latter are more evident (e.g., 'alarmism/scaremongering' and 'conflict'). The perception of the CoG as a public religion is mainly promoted through the press, which covers not only the official positions of the church but also unofficial—and sometimes personal—statements on behalf of clergy representatives. In this case, a more intense reference to political institutions is evident. At the same time, the analysis confirms the claim that the main goal of the press is to attract public attention through an agenda that triggers its emotions by promoting a profile of the CoG as a 'pressure group'.

The main aim of this study was to describe, from an empirical point of view, the various aspects of the discourse of the CoG with relation to the social and political aspects of the economic crisis that affected Greece. The CoG remains a constant factor in the Greek political system and further research needs to be performed in order to highlight the various elements and the multiple conditions that affect and permeate each aspect of the CoG's position within Greek society.

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S.K., G.K., Y.K. and F.K.; investigation, S.K., G.K., Y.K. and F.K.; resources, S.K., G.K., Y.K. and F.K.; data curation, S.K., G.K., Y.K. and F.K.; writing—original draft preparation, S.K., G.K., Y.K. and F.K.; writing—review and editing, S.K., G.K., Y.K. and F.K.; visualization, S.K., G.K., Y.K. and F.K.; supervision, S.K., G.K., Y.K. and F.K.; project administration, S.K., G.K., Y.K. and F.K.; funding acquisition, S.K., G.K., Y.K. and F.K. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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**Data Availability Statement:** The data presented in this study are openly available in Figshare at <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.14774388.v1>.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> For the ideological orientation of the EFSYN and Kathimerini, see (Nikisianis et al. 2019; Papathanassopoulos et al. 2021). As for the relation between the political discourse of the CoG and the two newspapers monitored in our research, there are no studies concentrating specifically on this relation. A few papers use the two newspapers as sources in order to cover specific research questions as case studies (e.g., the Greek ID card controversy, church–state relations) within a qualitative methodological framework (Molokotos-Liederman 2007) or from the point of view of conceptual analysis (Kessareas 2019) without focusing on the newspaper coverage of the discourse of the CoG. These articles are already included in our analysis and appear in the reference list of the paper.
- <sup>2</sup> For the newspaper circulation statistics in Greece see: <https://www.eihea.com.gr/eihea.php?contentid=67> (Athens Daily Newspaper Publishers Association, accessed on 17 March 2022) and <http://www.argoscom.gr/index.php?page=17> (ARGOS SA: Press & Book Distribution Agency, accessed on 17 March 2022). See also Papathanassopoulos et al. (2021, p. 200).
- <sup>3</sup> The statistical program used for the current research is IBM SPSS Statistics 26.
- <sup>4</sup> Due to space limitations and for better understanding of the analysis, in several cases, only the definition “official church” or “press” is used. In all these cases, the two identifications should be understood as referring to statements and positions made by CoG representatives and either expressed through the official website of the CoG (“official church”) or through the two newspapers (“press”) included in our research.

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